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COMMUNICATIONS AS AN EMERGING DISCIPLINE

● HAROLD D. LASSWELL

This paper, presented at Boston University during the tenth anniversary of its School of Public Relations and Communications, presents an overview of the contributions various disciplines have made to communications theory. Harold D. Lasswell is professor of law and political science at Yale University.

NO CHANGE in the academic world has been more characteristic of the age than the discovery of communication as a field of research, teaching, and professional employment. The university system of the United States is more flexible in adapting itself to new intellectual interests than corresponding institutions abroad. Hence it is not surprising that the arts and sciences of communication have been more actively cultivated here than elsewhere.

So far as the United States is concerned, a convenient base line for comparative purposes is the appointment of an interdisciplinary committee by the Social Science Research Council in 1931, and of another committee of the same type by the Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation¹ a few years later. One result of the former committee was the preparation of an annotated bibliography of the professional literature relating to public opinion, pressure groups, and propaganda. The bibliography was compiled because the members of the committee were astonished to learn how much had been published in fields unknown to them. The inference was that a bibliographic guide would perform an integrative service to all branches of science, art, and practice.

Several factors account for the fact that the lead in interdisciplinary effort in communication studies was taken at the time by political scientists. American political science was in a phase

¹ The responsibility was with David Stevens and John Marshall.

of growth at which it was casting beyond the formalities of political philosophy and public law in the hope of putting them in the perspective of the social process as a whole. Writers like A. Lawrence Lowell had drawn attention to the party system and Graham Wallas had won a following for the study of psychological factors in politics. Charles E. Merriam fostered the study of promotional activities, civic education, and political leadership; and it was Merriam who took the initiative in organizing the Social Science Research Council.²

One might legitimately ask why the lead was not taken by schools of journalism. After all, they were centered upon important institutions within the field of communication. The answer, I believe, is not difficult. At the time they were trade schools in outlook. Although affiliated with universities they were marginal members of the commonwealth of scholars. The early schools were intent upon winning the support of practical newspaper publishers and editors by turning out students who could get on a payroll. By putting the accent so heavily upon teaching the tricks of the trade the schools failed to perform the true function of the university in reference to any domain of enlightenment. They did not illuminate the journalistic process by providing a comprehensive factual basis for assessing the significance of this sector of the world for the goal values of society. It was out of the question for them to lead the academic world because they were barely part of it. At the time the situation was beginning to change with the emergence of new leadership (of whom I shall name but one, Professor Ralph D. Casey at the University of Minnesota). In intervening years schools of journalism have steadily expanded their intellectual scope.

The same factor helps to explain why schools of business, advertising, and merchandising did not provide interdisciplinary leadership in the university study of communication. At first graduate departments of economics kept themselves distinct from schools of business, and the departments did not fully perceive the permeating role of communication. True enough, classical market theory was built upon the postulate of equality of access to information. But there was little interest in inventing or applying tools

² Beardsley Rumel was the most significant figure among foundation executives in these developments. Rumel was trained as a psychologist. The Committee of the SSRC, referred to above, included the following political scientists: Harold F. Gosnell, E. Pendleton Herring, Jr., Harold D. Lasswell, Peter Odegard, Schuyler Wallace. Harwood F. Childs took the lead in establishing *The Public Opinion Quarterly* at Princeton. Bruce Lannes Smith had the laboring oar in the preparation of annotated bibliographies.

to demonstrate the degree to which this postulate held in concrete situations. More particularly, there were no empirical means of estimating the degree to which conceptions of self-interest were subject to control by communication strategies. An even more decisive point is that the typical business producer was assumed to be a "firm" whose interests were calculated in order to maximize profits. But do the policy makers of a firm actually identify with the firm? Or do they identify with family or investment groups that on occasion sacrifice the interests of a particular firm? It is the graduate schools of business who became actively concerned with the institutional realities of economic systems and who found an indispensable place in communication studies. Only recently does this appear to be having a reflex effect on the central body of economic analysis (as at Michigan).

Another professional group disqualified by academic resistance from performing a successful interdisciplinary role was made up of schools of education. Some of the most valuable techniques that have been developed for the study of communication were devised by educators who were trying to test the effectiveness of communication in the classroom. Word lists, tests of aptitude and attitude; any list would be a long one. But it was difficult to establish effective working relations with the central corps of university work in the social sciences and humanities.³

Three long-established professional schools might conceivably have provided the spark for modern developments: law, divinity, and medicine. So far as law is concerned, there is a rich literature that excels in practical hints on forensic rhetoric. More significant from a scientific point of view is the body of writing on jurisprudence that explores the phenomenon of collective influences upon deviational conduct. Some of the most original contributions to modern knowledge of communication came from jurists who were searching for criteria of responsibility for acts performed under conditions of panic, as in a theater fire, or of crowd excitement, as in a mob. In France, Judge (and later Professor) Gabriel Tarde, for example, became a major social scientist by the systematic way in which he placed psychological mechanisms in the center of social interaction.

But it was not by way of law schools that these influences were introduced to the contemporary scene most effectively. Until the

³ However, Lyman Bryson of Teachers College, Columbia University, was a key figure in stimulating the Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation.

"sociological jurisprudence" of Roscoe Pound at Harvard, and the appearance of "American realists" at Yale, Columbia, and Johns Hopkins, American law schools were trade schools with an outlook more closely related to the gadgetry of schools of education or journalism than to the university tradition.

Divinity schools are even more outspokenly concerned with problems of mass communication than schools of law. Ever since the Reformation and Counter Reformation put new vitality into preaching and missionary work, the training of clergymen in public speaking has been a major task of seminaries. But as with law schools, the achievements having most significance for communication studies are of a different kind. Nor am I alluding to the cookbook rules devised by copyists as a means of guaranteeing the faithful reproduction of the signs and symbols of a text. In that case we could go back to the Masoretes of first century Jerusalem.⁴

The reference is primarily to textual criticism. In fact, this was the crucible in which many of the fundamental categories and methods of modern scholarship were tempered for more general application. The study of content made it possible to challenge or corroborate the authenticity of text attributions and to restore the literary form of original versions. The biographical investigation of authors made it possible to establish linkages between the intentions and other characteristics of communicators and the purport and style of the message. The channels of communication were investigated in many dimensions ranging from the physical properties of papyrus, parchment, and paper through stylus, brush, pen, type face, and ink to the networks of copyists, printers, publishers, distributors, and libraries. Prototype researches were made into the world statistics of church attendance, conversion, and membership; and disclosures made concerning the susceptibilities of civilizations, social classes, interest groups, personality forms, and levels of crisis to the impact of channels and content of communication.

Scholarship revealed an extraordinary mixture of folklore elements with authentic historical components, and stimulated the generalization of the conceptions of myth and ideology. These were first applied to religious traditions and later passed to the study of secular systems of political, legal, and social doctrine. The comparative history of religion made it necessary to emphasize the

⁴Yule, G. Udny. *The Statistical Study of Literary Vocabulary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944. Chapter 1.

fundamental processes of diffusion, restriction, and fusion of rival cults and to explore the connection between esoteric secrets and exoteric disclosures. Despite all this richness the marginal position of divinity schools in the university community meant that there was little direct interdisciplinary impact during the period referred to.

At first glance it may seem surprising that I mention schools of medicine as possible sources of initiative. It is true that the bedside manner is less a matter of direct instruction than the manner of conducting one's self on the podium. But medicine has always relied upon communication as an instrument of therapy along with chemicals, knives, and braces. In the nineteenth century this became a matter of great professional and public concern with the prominence given to hypnosis, and more recently to the free associational and interpretative techniques of psychoanalysis. Like lawyers, the physicians have always been confronted by manifestations of the impact of collective interstimulation. They have seen "psychic epidemics" lay hold of whole populations with no visible evidence of organic lesions. Actually any medical advance in the therapies of communication has promptly led to a wave of generalization in the social process. We have seen studies devoted to such themes as the social influence of "suggestion," "imitation," "illusion," "delusion," "hypnosis," "the unconscious." But this strand of the medical tradition was largely missing from the curriculum of the schools of medicine 30 years ago. Even dynamic psychotherapy was better entrenched outside than inside the medical schools.

What of the disciplines traditionally regarded as the humanities? Here at least we are at the heart of the university tradition. One might expect interdisciplinary leadership in the study of communication to come from linguistics. After all, language is the most distinctive of all channels of communication. Furthermore, philologists were among the first to demonstrate uniformities that rivalled many of the generalizations of the physical sciences. In fact, however, these scholars did not take the lead. It appears that early success had led to the restriction of scope to comparative syntactics. By this expression I am referring to comparative grammar and the basic sounds—phonemes—of language. And it is in vocabulary changes, not in syntactics, that the greatest flexibility is to be expected. In this area it is still a little *infra dig* for good specialists to concern themselves with vocabulary.

The role of scholars in the study of literature resembles the linguists. They, too, occupy a central position in the communication processes of society. Further, in view of the enormous scope of literary researches, and the vast army of talent in this field, it seems probable that *some* scholar, at least, will pursue almost any idea. It can be shown that practically all data-gathering devices have been pioneered by someone professionally devoted to literary studies. We know of the most minute studies of the motives, aptitudes, and formative influences affecting the "who" of the communication paradigm: "*Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?*" Not only the individual "who," but the communicators of an epoch considered as a whole, have been combed through. Exceedingly detailed researches have been done upon vocabulary (word origins, length, frequency, distribution), sentence structure (length, grammatical arrangement, rhythm), and context (paragraphs, larger units). Investigators have concentrated upon the characteristic productions transmitted through a given medium and mode (novels, plays, poems, autobiographies); they have established the facts of circulation and readership; they have sought evidence of impact on all the value-institutional processes of society. Professional scholars in the literary field have found themselves making contributions to cryptography, to the detection of false legal documents, and to many other communication problems beyond the limit of their ordinary preoccupation.

The record shows that the interdisciplinary zeal with which communication studies were taken up in our time owes a great deal to I. A. Richards, the critic, and C. K. Ogden, the psychologist, and *The Meaning of Meaning*. The critics, as indicated before, have gone in many directions, not excluding the quantitative (as in Caroline Spurgeon's summary of Shakespeare's imagery).⁵

Nonetheless, the fact remains: The most successful statements generalizing the process of communication did not come from the scholars of literature. In their case two sharply contrasting methods dominate the field. On the one hand, there are patient, disciplined, even quantitative, studies of particular phenomena. On the other, the content is highly allusive and impressionistic. The middle range of theory construction so frequent in the social

⁵ Note that it was the Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation that had the vision to foster communication studies. Douglas Waples made the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago an important center. Waples' fields were literature and education. Concerning modern criticism see especially Hyman, Stanley Edgar. *The Armed Vision, A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948.

sciences has had little currency and may have operated to restrict the influence of the scholars of literature.

It is not absurd to suppose that the prototypes of interdisciplinary work might have been furnished by those branches of the humanities that dealt with nonverbal forms of expression: music, the plastic and pictorial arts, architecture. Words about nonwords, one may suggest, are somewhat more "objective" than words about words. This can be true for much the same reason that an anthropologist finds it easier to be objective in talking about a primitive chief than the current occupant of the White House. However, the United States was not rich 30 years ago in distinguished scholars of the arts. It is not without significance that Richards (and Ogden) were English, which was rich in literary critics, though rather impoverished in art scholarship when compared with Germany or Italy, for example.

Traditionally the historians have been bracketed with humanistic studies, and the compendious scope of the subject matter, together with the abundance of personnel, might suggest that the most comprehensive view of communication would come from historians. Beyond question they have done much to develop the categories of which systematic communication theories are compact restatements. Most of these conceptions were evolved as part of the great counterattack engineered by historians and the romantics generally against planned, revolutionary, and drastic social change—in a word, against the French Revolution. The most vexing problem was: If the life of a people cannot be made subject to abiding change by revolution, why do revolutions occur at all? All sorts of conceptions were invented or adapted as inquiry proceeded. I mention a few: "public clamor," "public sentiment," "public opinion," "crowd sentiment," "cosmic perspective," "spirit of the age." Some historians gave concentrated attention to these factors, especially after the rise of the Marxist challenge.

Of all the humanistic studies philosophy is the one with the historic claim to a central position. And it can be shown that philosophers had a great deal to do with the categories and approaches that were taken up when communication theory began to come into its own. American philosophers did in fact foster the growth of academic preoccupation with the analysis of informed public opinion. Recall, in this connection, John Dewey's *Public and Its Problems*. Several philosophers, among whom George H. Mead

was notable, were pivotal figures in social psychology, then in a state of parturition from adjacent specialties, such as psychology, social science, and history. The immediate impress of philosophers was limited by the circumstance that they were not much interested in protracted empirical researches. It is typical of the "mother matrix" function of philosophy that when anyone became intensely absorbed in the study of collective behavior, as did Robert E. Park, for example, the scholar removed himself from philosophy and migrated to sociology, for instance.

The contributions of philosophy to communication theory are becoming more rather than less profound as specialists in the rapidly growing discipline of communications studies become more capable of passing to and fro between theory and observation. The postulational logics, for example, have already affected the study of legal language; but the deepest effect, in close conjunction with mathematics, has been upon the design of computing machines, or "artificial brains." The roots go back at least to Charles S. Pierce and run through A. N. Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, Rudolf Carnap, and other logical positivists, to J. C. C. McKinsey and his colleagues.

The mansions of philosophy also include an armory of devices for exploring the more subtle nuances of communication; their potential, indeed, has not yet been tapped. I refer to the comprehensive orientation of Ernst Cassirer, for instance, and of such creative devotees as Susanne Langer in aesthetics.

Since the orientation of academic departments of psychology was not toward the analysis of collective behavior, they did occupy a vanguard position in communication research.

I have been suggesting some of the factors relating to the intellectual division of labor 30 years ago that are of help in explaining why political science, in particular, happened to play an important part at a certain time in the promotion of interdisciplinary research in communication. Since that time the initiative has moved elsewhere, although professional students of government and law continue to devote more and more attention to communication. By far the largest body of work of immediate significance has been done by scholars whose major conventional identification is with sociology, social psychology, and to a lesser extent, social anthropology.⁶ The last few years have witnessed a great expansion of

⁶ Among those in the early committees—and I cite them to represent disciplines, not for completeness—were Paul Lazarsfeld, sociologist; Hadley Cantril, psychologist; Hans Speier, sociologist.

numbers and influence, and this has been closely connected with the emphasis that has been put upon statistical and mathematical training, and upon research in the field or in the laboratory. In effect, an heroic attempt has been made to fashion an army of well-trained and properly equipped soldiers to fill in the chasm between the General Staff plans of the older theoreticians and the empirical battlefield. It is not my purpose to apportion individual or university accolades in this evolution. But it is no secret to anybody who is acquainted with the facts that a role of peculiar importance has been played by Professor Paul F. Lazarsfeld and the Bureau of Social Research at Columbia. The formation of social science research councils on various university campuses was begun in the 1920's. The formation of research bureaus, as at Columbia and Ann Arbor, specialized to the study of communication, has given a decisive impetus to the growth of what may one day become a world inclusive network of social self-observatories.

During recent years another great impetus has been given to the cross-disciplinary study of communication, this time from a relatively new quarter, namely, from engineers and neurologists who exploited their ties with mathematics and physics. I refer, of course, to the developments associated with Claude E. Shannon and Norbert Wiener and their circles.⁷

It is quite impossible for an alert mind to allow his attention to sweep across this remarkable growth of concern for communication without searching for explanations and without projecting the future in some degree.⁸ My assignment here does not include either responsibility in detail. Let me nevertheless offer one remark about the physiognomy of the emerging university. Every center and subcenter within the university community will contain at least some scholars who are sensitized to the significance of what is being done at that particular center for the understanding of life processes. All *interaction* among living forms is a complex and variable process of *collaboration* and *communication*. Hence all the value outcomes sought through the diversified institutional forms of society are specialized in various degree to communicating and collaborating. Economic outcomes subordinate commu-

⁷ Put in perspective by Miller, G. A. *Language and Communication*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1951; Cherry, Colin. *On Human Communication: A Review, a Survey, and a Criticism*. New York: The Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and John Wiley & Sons, 1957.

⁸ Consult Berelson, Bernard. "The Study of Public Opinion." *The State of the Social Sciences*. (Edited by L. D. White.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956, for a thoughtful review of the urge toward a more satisfactory balance between theory and data in these studies.

nication to wealth; political outcomes subordinate communication to power; and so on through the value outcomes. Only one of the value-institution processes is distinctly preoccupied with an outcome that culminates to an exceptional degree in the exchange of communications. We refer in this connection to the institutions of individual and collective *enlightenment*. It is appropriate that the part of the university community distinctly concerned with enlightenment should become a focal center of study and inspiration to studies that continue to open up the new world of communication knowledge.